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AUTHOR Allen, Sheilah M.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the second year of a cooperative penpal project between preservice teacher education students and middle school students. Following a review of the literature to provide a context for this kind of research, the paper offers demographic data about the students on both sites (n=27 at each site) and describes visits to the middle school and the university. The paper uses samples from letters to give a flavor of the richness of the project and explores issues arising from the letters and the entire experience. The paper concludes that the benefits were "enormous" for all participants, and that it is important for a teacher-educator to keep in touch with the realities of the public schools. Contains 10 references; appendixes include a data sheet for participants; a survey of reading interests, and 2 original letters from middle schoolers. (NKA)

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ED 395 309

Sheilah M. Allen

1996

YEAR TWO OF A PENPAL PROJECT: CONNECTING MIDDLE SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

In 1993 I bought a videotape which profoundly influenced both my personal and professional life (Latham & Morriss, 1993). The tape showed an Australian school-university research project in which preservice elementary teachers wrote to primary school students. The letter exchange culminated in a visit by the student teachers to the class they had been writing to. I used this model to set up Project Penpal, a letter exchange between my class of preservice secondary English teachers and a grade 8 class at a local middle school. I have written about the first year of the project (see Allen,1995, and Chapman and Anderson, 1995) but here would like to focus on the second year which was somewhat different due to the clientele and my interaction with them.

During the first year of the project, I was closely involved with the students on both sites in that I taught both classes. In addition, I read all the letters and photocopied those I considered interesting, representative or creative. In other words, copying was selective. In the second year, due to my university teaching schedule, I had no opportunity to teach the grade 8 class. I had the advantage of a paid graduate student who photocopied all the letters for me. The disadvantage was that I didn't read them as they were coming and going. I still maintained a weekly schedule at the middle school, picking up or dropping off letters in person. But I was removed from the interpersonal connection between the penpals. Interestingly the grade 8's were more willing to share their letters with one another than were the university students.

In exploring the parameters of Project Penpal 2, I propose to look at several sources of data. A review of relevant literature will provide a context for this kind of research. Data about the students on both sites will give demographics. The letters are rich sources of information. Visits to the middle school and the university will be described. Finally, issues arising from the letters and the whole experience will be explored. From this I hope to be able to communicate the advantages of a school-university connection.

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In reviewing the literature, I noted that virtually every study claimed that the participants improved their literacy skills. As English language arts teachers, the classroom teacher and I accepted this as one of our goals. Several studies I found of interest because it

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seems that even very young children have benefited from exchanges with other learners. Koeppel and Mulrooney (1992) described a program for American preschool children in which the interstate sharing of artifacts (photographs, drawings, stories) promoted understanding and valuing of different subcultures. Letters were exchanged between first grade children and preservice elementary teachers (Briggs and Kostelnik, 1994) resulting in interpersonal bonding and the promotion of emergent literacy. Another project involving written exchanges between eight and nine year old at-risk readers and teachers--both preservice and inservice--in a graduate reading course (Bromley, Winters, and Schlimmer, 1994) resulted in changes in children's attitudes, behavior, and literacy learning. Of the many studies involving ESL students, two were noted: Hadaway (1990) described a project in which university students and bilingual ESL students exchanged letters with the latter gaining motivation by having role models for language development. Similarly, Latino/a high school students wrote letters to penpals in university (Garcia-Vazquey and Vazquey, 1994). The participants met twice on campus, once in the high school. Benefits for the high school students included enthusiasm for reading and writing as well as improved literacy skills. Two studies on a different scale promoted cultural understanding. Students in English classes exchanged letters and videos interstate (Krim and Worsham, 1993), enabling them to deal with racial and ethnic differences. A global writing project using computer technology (Beazley, 1989) gave students an opportunity for letter exchanges. Benefits included motivation, improved literacy and keyboard skills, and cultural awareness.

In fact, there were two university classes who wrote to the grade 8's. The classes were different in makeup and nature, so I will deal with them separately. Section One consisted of 14 students, six men and eight women. Two of the women were mature students, but generally the students were very young, ranging in age from 19 to 25. Several came from small, rural communities while several were from other parts of Canada. In matching them with the grade 8's, I had asked both groups about writing to someone of another gender; three men were, therefore, paired with three girls and one woman was matched with a boy. Some of these matches proved more successful than others. Section Two, with nine women and four men, consisted of several students who knew each other due to physical education classes in common. Although many were young (early twenties), there were a few mature students as well. Matches were generally effective, with penpals having a lot in common.

The 27 middle school students, 14 boys and 13 girls, attended a rural school in a fairly affluent district. The school is a modern, high tech one with one computer for every two students. Within the class, there was diversity: two Native girls (First Nations), one Down's Syndrome girl (for whom an aide and a peer tutor were provided), one boy with Attention Deficit, and a range of academic abilities. They were 13 or 14 years old, most were born and had lived only here, and although English was spoken in all homes, several reported their parents could speak another language. Data on them, and on the university students, were gathered by administering an inventory on background and interests (see Appendix A). In addition, the grade 8's completed a questionnaire entitled "Who am I as a reader?" (see Appendix B) and wrote a paragraph in response to a picture stimuli (see Appendix C). I summarized these data for them, sharing the results using overhead transparencies. Then I matched these students with my university students who had also completed the inventory; some of the grade 8's were writing to Section One and some to Section Two.

The letters revealed even more about the students, and as time passed, many of the matches were surprisingly accurate in that penpals had a lot in common. The university students initiated the process with introductory letters, telling about themselves and asking questions of their penpals. There was great diversity and individuality from the beginning, reflecting the range of experiences students brought to the process. For instance, one woman who was going to be travelling to Las Vegas prepared a collage of sights she expected to see and enclosed it with her letter. Some used personal stationery or decorated the paper with stickers. Some enclosed photographs (later there was an exchange of photos, so that penpals were mounted on a poster at the back of the grade 8 classroom and on the walls of my office). Some students consistently wrote by hand while others chose to use the computer. They exchanged drawings and pictures, individualized writing paper and envelopes, and made reference to birthdays and holidays. There were widespread differences in concern for mechanics; some students recopied to perfect while others didn't bother to use spell check.

I have selected samples from the letters to give a flavor of their content: from Section One to Bayside "*I already wrote before I knew who you were, but I'm glad now that I have some idea about you. I have friends who are close to your age so hopefully I can*

avoid sounding like a condescending old person." His female penpal replied, *"How are you doing? I don't really no (sic) what to say because I don't really no (sic) you. But here are a couple of things you might find interesting about me. I'm very shy, I'm 13 years old, I have a cat and I like bikes."*
"Hi! I am kind of nervous so if this letter is kind of wacky I promise the next one will be more interesting." Her penpal responded, *"Thank you for the letter. I hope we become good friends. I understand you like daisys (sic) . My favorite flower is a tulip."*
To his female penpal a young man wrote, *"Happy birthday to you--even though I"m a little late in saying so. I'm happy that you're doing alright. Does it feel good to be a teenager now?"* She replied, *"I always write early and get it over with so then I don't have to write on my free time. Sorry to say but it does not feel any different to be a teenager at all (sic) I feel just normal, but I guess I could say I fell (sic) more confident (don't ask me why)."*
To her penpal a young woman wrote, *"Hey cool! I just got your letter! This is fun. I'm glad to hear that you aspire to be a vet; from your aparant (sic) love of animals, you'll be perfect!"* "Response: *"Next weekend I am going on a horse-trail ride with some of my friends. I've never ridden western before, but I will try it."*

From Section Two the following excerpts were selected:
"I am a fourth year English literature student. I have to admit that I <u>love</u> English--but I <u>can't</u> say that things like sentence combining and grammar thrill me. I guess that's why I want to be a teacher--so that when junior and senior high school students think of the subject, they think of reading and writing and talking about <u>interesting</u> things (not about whether it's spelled correctly.)"
Another young woman wrote to her male penpal, *"It's kind of strange writing to a complete stranger isn't it? I guess the best way to go about making us not strangers is to tell you a bit about myself. I want to teach English and also become a famous writer."* He answered, *"My hobbies are swimming, baseball, basketball, reading, and playing board games. I play several instruments, (sic) they are the alto saxophone, and the piano. I also am very good at singing."*
A mature woman wrote to her male penpal, *"Winter is on its way. Do you ice skate or do any winter sports? My boyfriend is going to teach me how to cross-country ski this year. I don't want to go downhill skiing. I'm too chicken."* Her penpal wrote back, *"Do you like to read books? Witch (sic) is your favorite T. V. show. (sic) I like the T. V. show thats (sic) called married with children."*

A mature man wrote to his boy, *"What kind of dog are you hounding your folks for? (pardon the pun) Do you have any hobbies? Are you left handed? I am. Do you watch Melrose Place because of Heather Locklear?"* The answer was, *"Some of my hobbies are playing sports and doing things with my friends. I wanted to get a golden retriever. No I am not left handed I am right (sic). Do you like the job you work at?"*
A woman wrote to her girl, *"So how was the field trip last Wednesday? I heard that it was interesting, but a bit boring. What did you think? What was your favourite part, or the most boring part? I've never been to a native Indian long house before so I don't know anything about it."* Her penpal's next letter asked, *"I was wondering what some of your hobbies are? movies? sports? I am so excited I started diving tonight it was lots of fun. (sic) I learned a back fall (back dive no bounce). I just finished three books in a serise (sic)."*

In classes with Section One of the course on reading and writing processes, I learned about the students through their writing in journals and learning logs via their assignments; through their small group discussions about readings; and through their oral contributions in a whole class situation. I noted early in the term that "non-conformism" was evident, that is, that groups disagreed and couldn't come to consensus. Differences in maturity and background I expected would lead the more advanced to take on a leadership role; in fact, two negative individuals influenced the tone of the class greatly. Most shared their views willingly; however, some did not want to work with a particularly unsympathetic woman. I kept careful track of their group interactions and contributions. Section One never developed a sense of groupness, a coming together of like minds, although subgroups in the class were close. A few students could be depended on to make significant contributions; however, a consistent tone was not developed (there were up days and down days). I didn't take a leadership role because I expected them to be capable of doing so. They were not.

The nature of the interactions in Section Two was quite different. The tone of the class was one of consideration for others' opinions and genuine interest in others' projects. Small groups worked well; I varied their composition so they would all get to know each other. Students were tolerant of one opinionated woman; I appreciated the life experiences she brought to the class. There

were no power struggles or unpleasant dealings with one another. Quite a contrast with the other class. But again I take no credit for the quality of their interactions.

After reading Section Two's letters from Term One (to and from Bayside) I made the following observations: initially both groups of students wrote a lot about activities, for example, sports, interests, pets, books, music, and family. My class asked a lot of questions of penpals. Computer graphics were in evidence, especially in the university students letters. A range of writing ability was revealed in all three classes. School was written about by several (too much homework). Humor from both penpals was enjoyable. Several students were artistic, decorating their letters with drawings. Photos were often included either of self or car. Significant differences were evident in letters 350 to Bayside: 13 wrote on the computer, 36 by hand. Bayside to 350, 14 wrote on the computer and 20 by hand. Significant differences also occurred by gender in terms of length: males wrote long letters 10 times, short ones 27 times. Females wrote 24 long letters, 17 short ones.

We visited Bayside on Nov. 9, Reading Break, with only three absent. Two boys met us and took us to the room. We played a mixing exercise like Bingo. Tours of the school showed preparations for the Remembrance Day assembly. Penpal switches were made when Bayside kids moved in or out or when 350 students quit or joined the class. Letters after the visit:

--the Bayside Buddy thing is great--it's the only social life I have!
--I was impressed with the school as well as surprised of (sic) the students regarding their school.
--The trip to Bayside really opened up my eyes as to the future of teaching. With the aid of new technology, students (sic) minds will be open to many different areas that were not already available.
--An enlightening experience in regards to the advances of education since my pre-university years.
--I enjoyed our trip to Bayside and found it an eye opener.
--Having been removed from the public school classroom for a number of years, visits like the one to Bayside are useful in examining student attitudes and changes in classroom structure as well as seeing if approaches to teaching have changed significantly over the past few years.
--I got to observe the different teaching atmospheres as well as teaching styles.

--The Bayside visit was useful as a way to see the current school environment and although my penpal is not that enthusiastic about writing I want to keep trying to establish a meaningful dialogue.
--In reference to the trip we took, I was impressed by many aspects of the school. I consider all the students fortunate to be able to attend such an advanced school.

I had prepared a handout for 350 as a guide of what to look for. (See Appendix D). One man noted:
1. Your penpal's homeroom *The electric clocks, modern construction, student's (sic) work on the walls, nice view through window.*
2. Library *Awesome CD Rom computer.*
3. Computer rooms *Number and size impressive.*
4. Multipurpose lunchroom *Communal, informal space in a school is very important.*
5. Hallways *Artwork.*
6. UA facilities *Excellent spaces and materiels (sic).*
7. School grounds *Trees, beautiful location, ample space.*
8. Other *Too bad more schools were (sic) more like this.*`

I asked the 350 classes to reflect in writing on what they would like retained of the class sessions for term 2. Most seemed to like the Sustained Silent Writing time, the use of learning logs, small group discussions, practical activities which accumulated to form an understanding of the writing practice and which culminated in a final paper or project. The latter were shared in a cursory fashion--more time would have been better.

I'm at a loss to explain the differences between the two sections. Gender, maturity, ability, personality all seemed to create a similar mix. Yet the tone in Section One, although predominantly positive, had negative undertones due to a couple of students. Section Two, on the other hand, was almost uniformly positive.

In term two, as in term one, gender differences were extreme: girls usually wrote longer letters, and included drawings or pictures or photos. Topics discussed ranged for girls from media (music, movies, television, books) to pets, sports, relationships while boys focussed less on the latter in favor of objects like mountain bikes. All wrote by hand. Few were good spellers. Initial letters from Bayside concerned what gifts had been received for Christmas. Most wrote that they had too much homework. They told what they

would like to see on a tour of the university campus. By the end of term, many students exchanged phone numbers and home addresses.

The university students' letters revealed similar patterns in that most wrote by hand, women sent drawings or photos, the majority of the women wrote long letters whereas only half the men did. They too wrote about Christmas gifts and media experiences. They asked their penpals to reflect on their heroes, people they respected or saw as role models.

Some excerpts from term two letters follow. First, Section One: From Bayside--"*My vacation was pretty layed (sic) back. I went skating a couple of times and I went shopping alot (sic).*"
"*Have you see Little Women? I saw it. It was really sad when Beth died. Have you read the book?*"
"*I stole some ducks from the pond at the university and I took them and tortured them and drove them to Calgary and let them go.*"
To Bayside--"*Your dad and my boyfriend both sound like embarassing (sic) people to take to Tim Allen movies! It must be a guy thing--tools and all!*"
"*I had a long, leisurely, lovely Christmas holiday. I went to visit my family in San Diego.*"
"*I'm glad to hear you're thinking about playing football. My son is joining too. He's had 3 practices and really loves it. The fields are sure muddy now though.*"
"*I've been showing all your letters to everybody I know. <u>Hundreds</u> of people have been reading your little scribblings.*"

Section Two: From Bayside--"*My writing is all over on one side of the page and I don't know why. I feel bad because you lost your work on the computer.*"
"*How was California? I'm sure you were thinking of me the whole time.*"
"*Do you like my school made envelope? I made it myself. I kind of screwed up on one side.*"
To Bayside--"*I hope you enjoyed your trip to the university. I saw some things that I have never seen before! I really enjoyed the theatre tour.*"
"*I had a blast skiing, but I managed to injure myself in three different places in three different botched arial (sic) manoevers (sic).*"
"*Have you given any thought to what you would like to be in the future? It's not crucial to have a firm plan but it is important to*

have some ideal. Like the old saying goes, 'if you don't know where you're going, all roads lead nowhere.'"
"How art thou? I'm feeling very sick these days and it's hard to concentrate on school."
"This week has been a nightmare! I have been sicker than a dog, I have fallen far behind in my homework, and to top it all off, I had been working on a large assignment for one of my courses and I lost it all on the computer."

The letters from Bayside were written by hand. Most of the last letters were short, although almost half the girls wrote long ones. Topics, similarly, were Christmas gifts and activities, sports, personal comments:
"Don't worry, be happy."
"My Dad's girlfriend might move in."
"Your darling penpal"
"The baby died and we buried it in the yard."
"My Mom is having a baby."
"From a greatful (sic) friend"

Some university students were over and above in terms of caring, for example, one woman gave her penpal a teddy bear for Christmas, another went to Courtney to see her penpal's gymnastics competition, a woman sent little gifts like hair barettes, and another stickers. Grade 8's responded by folding their colored letters into different shapes using origami. Students knew what they wanted to see at the University. Their heroes were Wayne Gretzky, Keannu Reeves, Nadia Comenici, my dog, Dad and Uncle, James Gallway and Nuryev. The grade 8's made Valentines for their penpals.

Bayside students were bussed to the university with a parent along for the supervision. They met their penpals in the Education building and were divided into three groups for the purpose of tours: the Theatre, Observatory, and optional campus visits (Library, Labs, Student Union Building, Gym, etc.). After students toured the campus, they ate together in a cafeteria (One man provided a tour of the kitchen). They congregated to be bussed back to the school. Follow-up letters indicated that middle school students were impressed by the campus and enjoyed their visit:

The final letters from Bayside bore out previous conclusions: all wrote by hand, drawings were from girls, girls were better spellers than boys, boys wrote short letters; half the girls wrote

short and half long ones. A typical sentiment was "Goodbye my friend. Let's keep in touch." Students wrote about what they had gained from the penpal project and made recommendations for the next year. From Bayside: *"It was good that we were able to write to someone older than us. I think you should continue this next year. And the way you paired us up by the things that we like. Next year I think you should start it earlier in the year and have more visits to each others (sic) schools."*
"I think that all of the pen pal writing was so cool. The teacher told me to write what I didn't like, and that is that it ends too early. I hope that you continue this. It's not only the writing part, but also the part of meeting someone too."
"I really enjoyed being part of your English project. It gave me a chance to practice my letter writing while corresponding with a student who was alot (sic) like myself. I always looked forward to receiving letters and learning new things about her."
"You (sic) matching of the students in your class to the students in our class was good. Everybody seems to have plenty of stuff in common with their penpals and have (sic) fun writing to them."
"I really enjoyed this research project that you did. Not only did it give you the information you needed for your book, but it also was fun for us. Thank you for spending your time delivering letters back and forth."

To Bayside: Section One--*"Well it makes me a little sad to think that this is my last letter. I have enjoyed hearing about your life and our two visits."*
"I am sorry but our time together is coming to an end. All I can say is : <u>I know you a (sic) nice guy</u> and I think you have a groovy heart and soul."
"I can honestly say that even though I was really unsure about what to write to you at first and what to say when I first met you, I'm really happy that I met you. Things seemed to work out ok in the end. Most definitely you are anything but an average, run of the mill, teenager."
"I've had a great time writing to you and I hope we will continue to be friends. Thanks for all the great letters!"
Section Two--*"At first I was wary of the penpal idea with Bayside because I thought it would take up a lot of my time, and not being for marks, probably wasn't worth it. Then I got my first letter! My penpal is such an amazing person and very much more down to earth than I had anticipated from a grade 8 girl. I wrote to her like I*

would write to any of my friends and we got very caught up in each other's lives."
"In the end I'm happy with our correspondence and in general I'm comfortable with everything we did. In fact, I'm happy because I think I brought more of him out writing than I feel was likely for him."
"I am just writing to tell you that I found writing to the Bayside kids a very worthwhile and enjoyable activity. I must admit, however, that at times I felt very uneasy about the whole idea of it. I believe that this can be attributed to the fact that I requested to write to a girl rather than a boy. I feel that I gained information and valuable communication skills that will be useful teaching implications (sic)."

Of the issues that I considered (handwriting versus computer, length of letters, improvements in literacy, penpals of different genders, gender differences) the key seemed to be gender differences.
Girls wrote more, they included decorations and artifacts, they wrote about relationships rather than objects. With a few exceptions, the men and boys wrote short letters, dealt with superficial topics such as sports, bikes, and cars, and generally showed less interest in continuing the correspondence than did the girls/women. The students' recommendations were to continue the project, to start earlier and have it last longer, and to have more on site visits.

In retrospect, I wish I had had the time to get to know the grade 8's better. I am sorry that I didn't take control of Section One (I've just recalled that the two sections were jealous of one another: "Which section do you like best?" they asked.) Each experience I have with students, whether university or in the schools, teaches me so much. I'm thankful as an academic to have an on-going school base in an excellent school with a teacher I respect and students I care about. It is so important for a teacher educator to keep in touch with the realities of the public schools. Even a once-a-week teaching assignment can make a difference. I encourage all who read this to develop a relationship between a classroom teacher and a college/university. The benefits are truly enormous for all participants. As one boy wrote, "From writing these letters I've learned better writing skills. I've also learned some different books to read, and I have a new friend. I've seen new faces and new people. This has been a very good experience and I'll never forget it. I appreciate the frequency of the letters you write me. I hope when this is over you and me (sic) will still write."

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APPENDICES

Data About You

_____
Name

Directions
Please answer the following questions by circling or filling in the blank.

Gender Male Female

I. Background

1. Where were you born? _____

2. Do you/your parents speak another language? Yes No
If yes, what language? _____

3, Have you travelled? Yes No If yes, where?_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Are you religious? Yes No

5. Do you have any pets? Yes No
If yes, what kind? _____

6. Do you think of yourself as a reader? Yes No If yes, what do you like to read? _____

_____

_____

_____

7. Do you think of yourself as a writer? Yes No If yes, what do you write?_____

_____

_____

II. Interests

1. Do you play sports? Yes No If yes, which ones? _____

_____

_____

2. Do you enjoy music? Yes No If yes, what kinds?

_____

_____

3. Do you enjoy movies? Yes No What are some of your favorites?

_____

_____

4. What T.V. shows do you like to watch?_____

_____

5. Do you watch Star Trek Yes No

Star Trek The Next Generation Yes No

Star Trek Deep Space Nine Yes No

Do you have favorite characters? _____

6. Are you concerned about the environment? Yes No

Do you care about the Clayoquot? Yes No

7. Would you rather write to: a woman _____

a man _____

either is O.K. _____

WHO AM I AS A READER? _____

Name

DIRECTIONS: Please fill in the blanks OR circle OR ✓

1. Something I find hard to read is _____

2. Something I find easy to read is _____

3. I like to read such things as _____

4. I dislike reading such things as _____

5. I read newspapers A Lot Sometimes Never

6. I read comics A Lot Sometimes Never
My favorite comic is_____

7. I read magazines A Lot Sometimes Never
My favorite magazine is _____

8. I like to read stories about:
_____ horror, _____ fantasy, _____ adventure, _____science fiction, _____ animals, _____ romance, _____ sports, _____ families, _____ humour, _____ other (example, _____)

9. I like to read true accounts about:
_____ war, _____ people's lives, _____ animals, _____ how to make/do books, _____ travel books, _____ books about hobbies, _____ other (example, _____)

10. Something I read in school that I liked was _____

11. Something I read when I was a kid that I enjoyed was_____

12. Some useful things to read are: T V Guide, recipes, schedules, directions for making or building things, newspapers, other (example, _____)

PS Something important about me which has nothing to do with reading is _____

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ON YOUR TOUR OF BAYSIDE, WHAT DID YOU NOTICE ABOUT:

1. Your penpal's homeroom _____

2. Library and its facilities _____

3. Computer rooms and facilities _____

4. Gym and PE facilities _____

5. Multipurpose lunchroom _____

6. Counselling services _____

7. Staff room _____

8. Range of academic classrooms eg. science, math, French _____

9. Different pods and hallways _____

10. UA facilities eg. music, art, drama, home ec, tech._____

11. School grounds _____

12. Other _____

Abby-Gail.H
Jan 4th/~~25~~ 95

Dear Omdrea,

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Ho was your christmas? I had Danish christmas (as always) with my dad's side of the family. We ate our christmas dinner on Dec. 24th then we sing some christmas carols, (we couldn't sing as many because we usually have song books but my Uncle Steve accidentally burnt~~s~~ them.) We alway sing Silent Night last, Then we opened our presents. we fooled around for a few hours and my mom came and picked us up around 11:00 pm we went home and opened a present each then we went to bed. In the morning we did the traditional (to most people in Canada) christmas. From my dad and step mom I got oil paints, canvases, oil paint brushes, a much music t-shirt, a horse calander, and my step mom, Pam, finally finished the nighly's for my sister and I. We got to pick the matirial and everything for

Jan. 1 1994

Dear sandy-

My Christmas was pretty good I saw some of my relitives for Christmas. I got lots of clothes and new shoes. how was your new year did you Celebrate it. How was your Christmas.

From Tony

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